What Ifs

As Tension Escalates Over Lithuania, Bush Faces Hard Choices

Public Doesn't Want Unrest In Baltics to Block Summit Or U.S.-Soviet Detente

Weighing Risks of Sanctions

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WASHINGTON – Historic agreements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union on Germany, strategic missiles and the withdrawal of the Red Army from Eastern Europe seemed all but assured in the early weeks of 1990. And then tiny Lithuania, a Baltic state forcibly absorbed after the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact, declared its independence.

The Soviet Union, after acquiescing in the dismemberment of its Eastern European empire, now wants to slow down the train of change. With the prospect of a Soviet blockade threatening Lithuania's survival, President Bush has an unenviable choice: support for the Lithuanian people asserting a cherished American right of self-determination, or support for Soviet President Gorbachev and the agenda of historic changes he seems willing to negotiate with the White House.

This agonizing dilemma turned more acute yesterday, when Lithuanian officials reported that the Soviets have followed through on their threats to shut off the supply of oil to the Baltic republic. The Soviets also have threatened to cut off natural gas supplies. Last night, the administration was scrambling to verify the report of the oil cutoff, but an official cautioned that even if it is confirmed, the U.S. won't necessarily retaliate immediately. He said the Soviets could reverse themselves.

Shrinking From a Fight

Lithuania has created deep tension between what Mr. Bush wants to do and what events might force him to do: Impose sanctions against the Kremlin for economically strangling the Lithuanians. More than that, the issue pits some of the Republican Party's most vocal conservatives against Mr. Bush and his moderate supporters, whose first priority is to support Mr. Gorbachev.

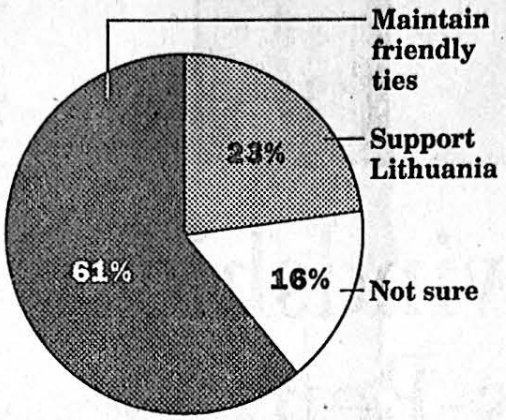
To a surprising degree, the American people seem overwhelmingly on the side of Mr. Gorbachev and the Bush administration's efforts to avoid a fight over Lithuania. Even if the Soviet Union violently suppresses Lithuania's bid for independence, the American public opposes canceling next month's planned summit talks between George Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev—by a stunning 61% to 31%, according to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll.

A surprisingly similar number of Americans think Mr. Bush "shouldn't get involved" by recognizing Lithuania. They would rather the U.S. stay on good terms with Moscow than support the republic's bid to secede.

Nonetheless, Mr. Bush appears to feel he may be forced to do something to support the Lithuanians, even at the risk of undermining Mr. Gorbachev and the chances for historic deals. If Mr. Gorbachev presses the fuel embargo even further, the administration has reluctantly concluded it would have to hold up new trade pacts with the Soviets that Mr. Bush ballyhooed at the Malta summit. And if the Soviets go so far as to use force in the breakaway republic, the summit or the arms control talks would probably be called off.

Gorbachev vs. Lithuania

"IF THE CHOICE were between maintaining friendly ties with President Gorbachev or supporting the Lithuanians' efforts for independence, which do you feel is more important?"



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A Lucky Outfielder?

The Lithuania crisis seems to have forced Mr. Gorbachev to the right on arms-control issues as well. The Soviet military apparently has forced an end to new concessions by Moscow in the negotiations, at least for now. And if the new hard line can't be overcome next month, when Secretary of State James Baker flies to Moscow for crucial pre-summit talks, the prospect of a summit deal could vanish.

"Things have suddenly gotten much tougher," says Marshall Goldman of Harvard's Russian Research Center. "Until now, George Bush has had nothing but good news from Moscow. He's been like an outfielder who just sticks out his glove and the ball falls in. Now he has to chase those balls hard to catch them."

For now, the administration's goal is to keep focused on the historic changes now within reach: deep arms cuts by Moscow and plans for German unity and Eastern

Please Turn to Page A10, Column 1

What Ifs: Bush Faces Tough Choices on Lithuania; Poll Shows Public Doesn't Want Summit Derailed

Continued From First Page

European independence. The administration is determined not to allow Lithuania to throw the process off track. So even if the administration feels compelled to respond to a Soviet crackdown by imposing sanctions, it will aim to make them as minimal and cosmetic as possible.

For instance, now that the Soviets have moved to cut off fuel supplies, the U.S. probably will apply sanctions only in the trade and economic area, leaving intact the chance of achieving more far-reaching agreements on arms and political reform of the Communist bloc. The trade pacts were in jeopardy anyway because the Soviet government still hasn't passed a law liberalizing emigration, long a key U.S. condition for trade concessions.

Meanwhile, administration officials are campaigning on Capitol Hill and with reporters to convince people that the arms-control deals are advantageous to the U.S., and shouldn't be sacrificed to Lithuania. "Our policy toward the Soviet Union is shaped by what is in the interest of the United States of America," Secretary of State James Baker told Congress yesterday.

Moreover, America's European allies agree with American public sentiment on Lithuania. The allies are pushing Mr. Bush to keep broader superpower ties on schedule. Just this week, Mr. Bush met with a few senators just back from a visit to Moscow and hinted that he is getting pressure from America's allies not to let Baltic unrest push the superpowers off their track.

Mr. Bush and Mr. Baker sense no public pressure for them to do more, and they avidly follow poll readings on the subject. The new Journal/NBC News survey will only reinforce that feeling.

"How do I account for the polls that suggest that we should somehow not get involved in the question of the Baltics?" Mr. Baker asks rhetorically. "I suppose that some of it is a recognition on the part of the American people that we have a lot of interests at stake here that are very important to the United States of America."

Washington bureaucrats have grown accustomed to having ringside seats for wrangling between officials from the White House and the State and Defense Departments over how to handle basic superpower relations. But in this case, they are surprised by the lack of debate. Administration officials from often-combative agencies insist there isn't any high-level internal challenge to their strategy of minimizing the Lithuania issue.

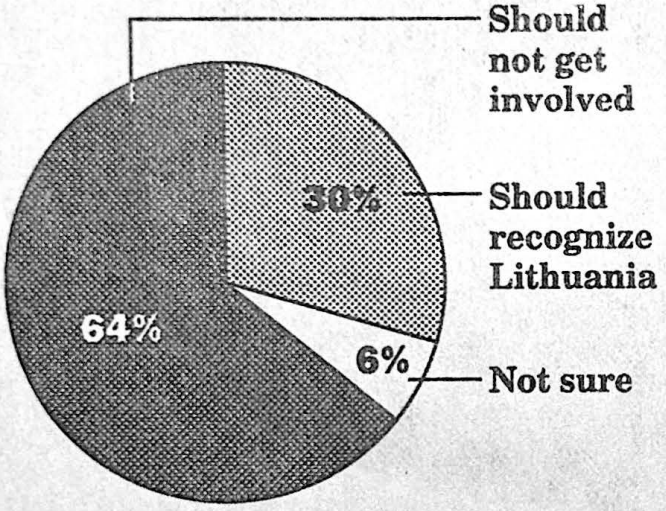
When some hawkish midlevel Pentagon aides recently suggested that the administration should prepare to send material assistance—petroleum products or hard currency—to Lithuania, the idea was slapped down. Indeed, some officials felt the president went too far by publicly saying last weekend that the threat of a fuel cutoff left him "deeply disturbed."

Such sentiments have produced a profound ambivalence within the administration about the Lithuanians' pursuit of independence from the Soviet Union, a cause the U.S. technically supports. Nowhere was that ambivalence more apparent than a few days ago, when Mr. Bush met privately with leaders of the Baltic-American community.

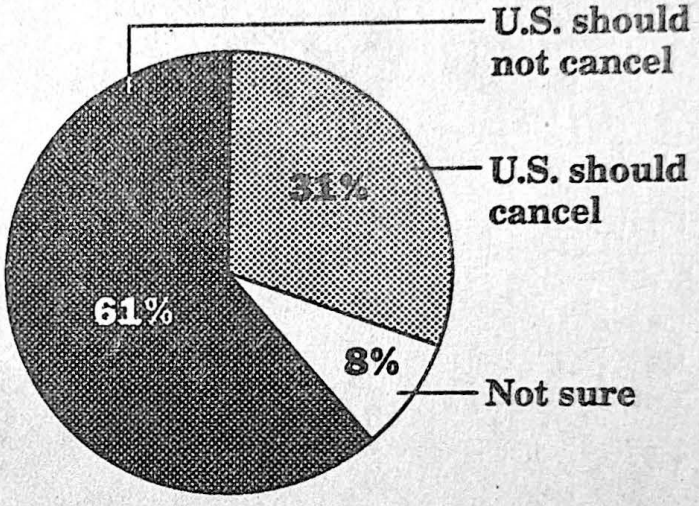
The Baltic-Americans, who had been clamoring for weeks for a White House

What Should Bush Do?

"RECENTLY, Lithuania, one of the republics in the Soviet Union, declared its independence. Do you think the United States should recognize Lithuania as an independent country, or should the United States not get involved?"



"IF THE SOVIET UNION uses military force to prevent the Lithuanians from establishing an independent nation, do you think the United States should or should not cancel the upcoming summit between President Bush and President Gorbachev?"



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